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ABSTRACT

To compare elicited imitation performance across two conditions (no context and a verbal pragmatic context), nine language disordered children (5 to 7 years old) were administered Carrow's Elicited Language Inventory in a standardized form and an experimental form using discourse cues. Results showed no signficant differences in linguistic performance as measured by accuracy of imitation between pragmatic context and no context test conditions. Findings indicated that the pragmatic context used in the study did not improve linguistic accuracy of imitation for language disordered children. Results suggest that when assessing language disordered children, clinicians should not assume that inclusion of a pragmatic context will enhance verbal performance. (CL)

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Effect of a Pragmatic Context on Elicited Imitation

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Abstract

Elicited imitation is often used to measure the linguistic performance of elementary school children. However, conflicting results have been reported regarding the affect of context vs. no context on children's elicited imitation behavior. In this study, Carrow's Elicited Language Inventory was administered in its standardized form and in an experimental form using discourse cues to language disordered children. Results showed no significant differences in linguistic performance, as measured by accuracy of imitation, between pragmatic context and no context test conditions. The findings indicated that the pragmatic context used in this study did not improve linguistic accuracy of imitation for language-disordered children. Diagnostic implications are discussed.

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The linguistic performance of children in elementary schools is often measured by elicited imitation (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 1981), and a commonly used elicited imitation assessment instrument is the Carrow Elicited Language Inventory (CELI) (Carrow, 1974). Although administration of the CELI does not allow for use of context cues, it has been suggested that use of context cues influences elicited imitation. However, studies have reported conflicting results regarding the effect of context cues vs no context on children's elicited imitation (Nelson & Weber-Olsen, 1980; Hale-Haniff & Siegel, 1981; Connell & Myles-Zitzer, 1982; Weber-Olsen, Putnam-Sims, & Gannon, 1983).

Nelson and Weber-Olson (1980) manipulated objects so as to enact events expressed in sentences. The subjects were required to imitate the sentences in response to each verbal model and corresponding object manipulation. Elicited imitation performance of both language-normal and language-disordered subjects was significantly enhanced in response to the experimental precedure. Hale-Haniff & Siegel (1981) provided a different non-linguistic context for the sentence imitation task presented to their language-disordered subjects. Pictures and verbal models were presented which corresponded to events expressed in sentences. Linguistic performance was found to improve significantly in response to the experimental procedure, as compared with a no-context condition. Connell and Myles-Zitzer (1982) studied the effects of three non-linguistic contexts; line drawings, still posed pictures, and moving enactment, on the elicited imitation performance of language-normal children. No significant differences were found for any of the three

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context variables. Lastly, Weber-Olsen et al. (1983) found that a non-linguistic context (object manipulation) significantly improved linguistic accuracy of imitation of language-disordered children but no significant effects were observed when this variable was introduced into the same task given to language-normal children.

The research above was directed towards the study of non-linguistic context on elicited imitation. There has not been comparable study of the effects of verbal context on linguistic accuracy of performance in elicited imitation. The purpose of the present study was to compare elicited imitation performance across two conditions; no context and a verbal pragmatic context, i.e. topic-comment on topic. It was hypothesized that linguistic performance as measured by elicited imitation in a pragmatic context would be significantly different from linguistic performance in elicited imitation without context.

METHOD

Subjects

Nine children (~~six~~ eight boys and one girl) between the ages of 5:4 (years:months) and 7:11 ($\bar{X}$ age 6:9) served as subjects. All were enrolled in public school speech-language programs, and were receiving management for disordered syntax. Evaluations indicated that speech articulation and hearing acuity were within normal limits for all subjects.

Stimuli

Each experimental item was comprised of an initial statement or question (topic) and a subsequent stimulus sentence (comment on topic). Specifically, each statement or question served to introduce a

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conversational topic and each stimulus sentence served as a comment on the topic. The stimulus sentence in each experimental item was the target for the subject to imitate. Each of the stimulus sentences formulated for the pragmatic context (PC) condition matched one item in the CELI. Care was taken to preserve sentence length and target syntactic structures. However, the stimulus sentences differed from the matched CELI sentences with regard to semantic content to eliminate any possible practice and learning effects. The stimulus sentence and the paired statement or question differed from each other in semantic and syntactic structure to prevent linguistic modeling or cueing from occurring within the experimental item. Table 1 shows examples of test stimuli.

Procedure

Each subject was tested individually in two sessions. In one session, a standard CELI was administered and in the other session the experimental items were administrated. Two examiners were present during all administrations of the experimental PC conditions. Each subject was instructed to listen and watch as one examiner asked a question or made a statement (topic) to which the second examiner responded (comment). The subject was then instructed to imitate the second examiner's response. Subjects were familiarized with the PC condition task with two trial items which followed the instructions. The trial items were not repeated during test administration and were not included in the data analysis. The sequence of test presentation was counterbalanced across subjects to eliminate any possible learning effects. Responses were tape-recorded and transcribed for scoring and analysis after each session. Scores for both conditions were determined according to the criteria defined for the CELI; any word

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substitutions, omissions, additions, or transpositions constituted item errors. Examiner reliability using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient for scoring and analysis of responses was r=.90.

RESULTS

Individual raw scores and group mean scores are shown in Table 2. The results of a two-tailed t-test for paired samples indicated no significant differences ($p>0.05$) between the two test conditions, i.e. presence or absence of a pragmatic context, as measured by elicited imitation in the present study.

DISCUSSION

Previous studies (Connell & Myles-Zitzer, 1982; Weber-Olsen et al., 1983) indicated no consistent relationship between non-linguistic context and linguistic performance in elicited imitation, particularly for language disordered children. The findings of the present study indicated that for at least one linguistic event, a pragmatic context, there was a similar lack of contextual influence upon linguistic performance in elicited imitation. This finding contradicted Hale-Haniff and Siegel (1981, p.29) who stated that "the inclusion of context in imitation tasks seems desireable both because, in general it enhances performance, and also because it makes the test situation at least a bit more like normal conversation or communication." The inclusion of conversation-like context in the present study and various contexts in other studies (Connell & Myles-Zitzer, 1982; Weber-Olsen et al., 1983) did not improve elicited imitation. The pragmatic-linguistic context developed in the present study made the test situation more like normal discourse, however no significant differences were found between the two test conditions. Therefore, it

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does not follow that inclusion of a pragmatic context during elicited imitation tasks would be of benefit in the clinical diagnostic situation.

Connell and Myles-Zitzer (1982) noted the demands which imitation placed on a child. Specifically, imitation required linguistic performance without benefit of communicative intent. They suggested that contextual cues failed to enhance linguistic performance in elicited imitation because of the complexity of an imitation task. Results of the present study indicate that, for language disordered children, the complexity of imitation may negate the facilitative effects of both non-linguistic and linguistic context cues.

Weber-Olsen et al. (1983) attributed the significant effects non-linguistic cues had on elicited imitation performance of language disordered children as due to their strong reliance on non-linguistic context information for language comprehension and expression. Results of the present study indicated that language-disordered children did not rely on linguistic context information provided by discourse cueing or pragmatic process (topic-comment on topic) for their verbal performance, perhaps due to lack of ability to use such information. Therefore, when assessing language-disordered children, clinicians should not assume that inclusion of a pragmatic context will enhance verbal performance.

Further study is warranted to compare the effects of various pragmatic context variables on linguistic performance in structured, linguistic production tasks across groups of language-normal and language-disordered children. The latter data would begin to provide a systematic means of measuring the relationships between context, linguistic competence, and linguistic performance.

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Table 1. Sample items from the CELI and the Experimental PC conditions.

CELI Item #5:	Stimulus sentence for imitation:
	Have you been gone?
PC Item #5:	Topic - Statement from Examiner #1:
	I'm playing hide and seek.
	Comment - Stimulus sentence for imitation from Examiner #2:
	Have you been caught?
CELI Item #7:	Stimulus sentence for imitation:
	Tell everyone what I want to do.
PC Item #7:	Topic - Question from Examiner #1:
	How can I help you?
	Comment - Stimulus sentence for imitation from Examiner #2:
	Show everyone what I want to make.

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TABLE 2. Individual and mean scores for all subjects on no pragmatic context and pragmatic context elicited imitation tasks.

Subjects	Age (yrs:mos)	CELI	Experimental PC Condition
JV	5:4	18	17
SS	6:3	14	6
BM	6:5	10	7
PL	6:10	5	4
JJ	6:11	15	7
PR	7:3	7	3
AS	7:4	13	11
JM	7:7	12	13
ME	7:11	25	22
	$\bar{X}$= 6:9	$\bar{X}$= 13.22*	$\bar{X}$= 10.00*

* NS = $p>0.05$

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